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ABSTRACT

A study conducted at a primary school in Birmingham, England, considered teachers', college tutors', parents', and pupils' perceptions of the way in which a group of 4-year-old children became incorporated into two reception classes. Study methodology included teacher and researcher observations and the videotaping and photographing of six types of social episodes at school: dressing and undressing, playtime, drinks, table-based work, lunchtime, and coming to school and going home. Home-based activities included a survey of 62 parents (with a 75% response rate), diaries kept by parents of seven 4-year-olds about conversations with their children, and tutor-parent-child discussions. Study findings suggested that children may be most under stress during the first important weeks of school when students are separating from their parents, siblings, and homes; when they are in transition from one activity to another; and when they are being incorporated into the class as a group. The child-school incorporation process is a dynamic, multifaceted, interactive process including all the participants involved. Appropriate changes and improvements in policy and practice must be based on a cognizance of the impact of separation, transition, and incorporation on children. At the school serving as the site of the study, a number of such changes have been made in the areas of home-school links, admission policy, classroom practice, and appraisal and development of policy and practice. (Contains 31 references.) (AC)

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START

Sharing of Thinking on the Art of Research into Teaching

ED352121

Four Year Old Children in Reception Classrooms; Participant Perceptions and Practice.

Dr Anthony Ghaye

Dr Christine Pascal

AN OCCASIONAL PAPER

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WORCESTER COLLEGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
START OCCASIONAL PAPER 1

FOUR YEAR OLD CHILDREN IN RECEPTION CLASSROOMS: PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE

Dr. Anthony Ghaye
Dr. Christine Pascal

ABSTRACT

There continues to be an increasing number of four year old children in reception classrooms in the U.K.. The child-school incorporation process is a dynamic, multifaceted, interactive and poorly understood phenomenon. This paper summarises a project that investigated this critical period in the life histories of a group of children. The project viewed the researcher, teacher, parent and child as collaborators in an illuminative process. There is a need to challenge the notion that the child simply 'adjusts' to school. Children are most likely to be under stress during the first weeks of school when the reduplicated rites of separation, transition and incorporation are going on. Appropriate changes and real improvements in policy, provision and practice need to be based upon a cognizance of the lived experiences of these rites for all the participants.

INTRODUCTION

There were four important reasons for starting this project. First, starting school is a critical period in the life history of every child. It makes a range of potentially stressful demands upon them, some social and emotional, some physical and others linguistic and intellectual in kind. For some children their early encounters with the wider, less familiar and perhaps more impersonal world of the reception classroom is a happy and successful one. For others 'becoming pupils' (Willes 1983) represents a series of life crises and occasions full of tension and anxiety (Hughes et al. 1979).

The inadequacies, apparent contradictions and blind spots in much of the existing research and recorded experience related to under-five's starting school was another reason for undertaking the research. Much of the starting school literature is based upon the idea that the child 'adjusts' to school. It is predominantly a one-way process. Much of the research discusses this adjustment in relation to previous events in a child's life, such as the pre-school playgroup or nursery school, and in terms of organisational structures, resources, mechanisms and procedures (Cleave and Sharp 1986, Coleman et al. 1977, Jowett 1986, Myers 1986, N.A.P.E. 1986, Stark 1986, Thompson 1975, Widlake 1971).

Until recently research into early years education has tended to under-emphasise 'experience' of starting school, and has therefore tended not to foreground, clearly and explicitly, the nature of the lived experiences of children, parents and teachers. A notable exception is the study by Barrett (1986).

Our project aimed to complement existing work in the field of early education by setting out to elicit and interpret participant perceptions of the way a group of four year old children became incorporated into two reception classes. Our belief is that the child-school incorporation process' is best understood by focusing on the links between experience, meaning and action. This paper aims to illuminate some of these links.

A third reason for undertaking the work is the sharp rise in the number of four year olds in reception classrooms. The pressure for pre-school provision for four year olds in the U.K. is met largely by admissions to reception/infant classes. In 1984, 42% of 3's and 4's were in school. Just over half of these children (22% of the age group) were in nursery classes. The remaining 20%, which is 236,000 children, had already been admitted to infant classes (Woodhead 1986). Given these statistics we thought this phenomenon was worth studying.

Finally, the project was established and based largely in one school in order to help it improve its existing practice and provision. It was to be of direct practical benefit to the school and was an expression of our commitment to Infant school improvement strategies.

SOME EMERGING THEMES

A number of themes emerge from an analysis of the rhetoric about and the reality of provision, practice and experience for the under-five's in

reception classrooms. Deriving general statements that are warranted and meaningful is problematic due to the contrastive styles of enquiry into early years education, their different foci, loci and samples. Some of the research shows tendencies in certain directions. We believe however that this recorded experience is most appropriately used to increase our sensitivity towards key issues and possible associations. Some of the important themes appear to be:

1. Best interests theme

This focuses upon the child. Two key questions are, 'How far is it in the child's best interest to become part of a reception class before the age of five years?' 'What are the short and longer term socio-economic, psychomotor and intellectual benefits?' Three reports help to point up some of the key issues. Hughes et al. (1979) asked teachers to observe 260 children, whose ages ranged from 4:3-5:5 years, in 13 infant classes in Inner London. On the basis of teacher perceptions they concluded that 13% of the sample were generally having difficulty coping with school at the halfway point of their first term. These children were described as being unhappy, disruptive and so on. Approximately 25% of the sample had difficulty concentrating, with language and fine motor control. It is worth noting from their study that, "While the pattern and frequency of difficulties at the group level appears to be remarkably consistent over the infant school years, there is much more variation in the extent to which these difficulties persist for any individual child. In the present study we found that a significant proportion of the children who were having difficulties on entry to school were still having them four terms later." (p.194)

In a report by Norris (1986) we find reference to an increasing amount of American research which claims that teaching children intellectual skills at an early age may not be in the best interests of the child. An important distinction is made between a child being 'bright' and one being ready for school.

This point is elaborated in an article in a recent edition of Child Education (1987) where parents are reminded that for 'bright' children, learning in school is but one part of the educational process. Parents should not loose sight of the importance of the child's social development which can be fostered in the home. Further, the Educational Institute of Scotland is campaigning to try and convince parents that early entry to reception classes is certainly not in the best interests of the child. "The introduction into this environment of a very young and socially immature child (is) disruptive to the work of the class and not advantageous either to the young child or to the other pupils in the class." (Child Education 1977)

2. Deficiency theme

This focuses upon human and physical resources. Current provision for the under-five's in the U.K. is varied in kind and quality (Kernig 1986). In 1986 over 70% of the four year old population were in infant classes. The problem is that the provision is uneven and inadequate. Human and physical resources are often lacking and are inappropriate. For example, the Under-Five's Initiative, set up with the aid of a £1.2 million grant from the Department of Health and

Social Security will come to an end in 1987 unless alternative funding can be found. Cleave et al. (1982) reported that the activity spaces in many reception classes that had four year olds in them was severely confined. She also found that many of those places inside and outside the school with which the child has regular, almost moment-by-moment contact, did not constitute an appropriately stimulating environment for under-fives. The view held by Sewell (1986) is that appropriate provision for this group of children does not mean more of them being admitted to reception classes. She argues that more help is needed with, "our existing provision in the form of day care to assist working mothers, more adults per child in nurseries, more financed help through training grants to raise standards of playgroups and childminders, more combined family centres." (p.13)

3. Matching Theme

This focuses upon the curriculum. Important questions to explore are, 'How far does recognised reception class practice have to be changed to match the learning and developmental needs of young four year olds?' 'What are the important resource implications for offering these children an extended nursery education rather than an early introduction to infant education?' Kernig (1986) suggests that the most appropriate curriculum for children in infant classes is an individual one that emerges from the child's activity and interest. She develops this pupil-centric view by saying that,"no child can be seen as average, and the classroom should reflect the wide variety of educational needs found within it." (p.42) Although undertaken in the context of nursery education for disadvantaged pre-school children in America, Schweinhart et al. (1986) also stressed that a child-initiated style of early education was important and that it played an important role in the child's social and intellectual development. In a comparative study of pre-school curriculums the research concludes that there is a real need for teaching under-fives to take initiatives, make choices and to direct their own work. It goes on to suggest that this kind of experience helped to prevent a range of violent and delinquent teenage behaviours. The Third Report from the Education, Science and Arts Committee (Great Britain: House of Commons 1986) is rather more cautious when discussion the possible long term benefits of early education when it says, "an expansion of pre-school provision would need to be justified on the 'certainty' that every child will benefit when in their teens or later." (para. 5.6)

One of the most influential pieces of research conducted recently in the U.K. to explore the quality of pupil learning experiences, was undertaken by Bennett et al. (1984). One finding that has received much attention is that concerned with the degree of mismatch between task and learner. In general they found that the ability of high attaining children to cope with new tasks tended to be under-estimated by teachers, low-attainers were over-estimated. A consequence of this is that teachers were seen to pitch work for the notional 'average' attaining child. When applied to the context of four year olds in reception classes this is an inadequate and seriously inhibiting view of what is involved in planning an enhancing and truly facilitating curriculum for these children. Interestingly, the degree of mismatch between task and learner was less in infant schools than in schools that catered for both infant and junior aged children.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The interpretative account that follows is not only an attempt to see the early encounters of four year old children in reception classes through adult eyes, through a teacher practitioner perspective or to conceptualize experiences from the point of view of the 'detached outsider'. The thoughts and feelings of the pupils are important and are also represented. Our starting point therefore was to design a study which was collaborative in kind, where all the participants were viewed as co-researchers with each party assisting others in an exploration and understanding of their experiences. It was to be a research design that valued the interdependence of all the participants, one based on non-hierarchial relationships between them and one where the research act, subsequent learning and any changes in school practice was accessible to all those involved. We therefore came to regard our work in school as 'participative research' (Elden 1981) in that each of the four critical research decisions, namely, those of problem definition, choice of methods, data analysis and the use of our findings, was influenced in some way by those directly affected by the project. These were the head teacher, the reception class teachers and their assistants, parents and their children. In short, we were highly dependent upon those who were going to generate the evidence. We had to learn how to tolerate not being 'in charge', not being the experts but the co-learners. We needed to sort out ways to cope with the pressure to work from other people's definitions of the child-school incorporation process.

Fig.1 represents a kind of time table of activities consisting of three phases spread across nine months. For each phase we had a set of intentions and a manner of proceeding.

The school

The pilot stage of the project was undertaken in a primary school in Hollywood in Birmingham. The area is characterised by a mixture of post-war privately owned and council semi-detached and smaller detached houses. The total number of children on roll in September 1986 was 322. The teaching staff comprised the head teacher, twelve teachers and two classroom assistants, with six teachers in the junior department, five in the infant department and one remedial teacher. The two reception classes shared one classroom assistant.

The two teacher who had four year olds in their classes were female, both infant trained, with a number of years of teaching experience. One was head of the infant department and had been with the school for twenty-three years. Neither teacher could call upon any formal nursery training. The Autumn of 1986 was the first year they had experienced younger four year old children in their class.

The significance of the problem

In 1984 the school admitted its first group of pre-rising five year olds. This was in line with local authority policy. One of us, (Christine), was a full-time member of staff in the school at the time and recalls how the child-school incorporation process caused a number of socio-emotional, physical and intellectual problems for the

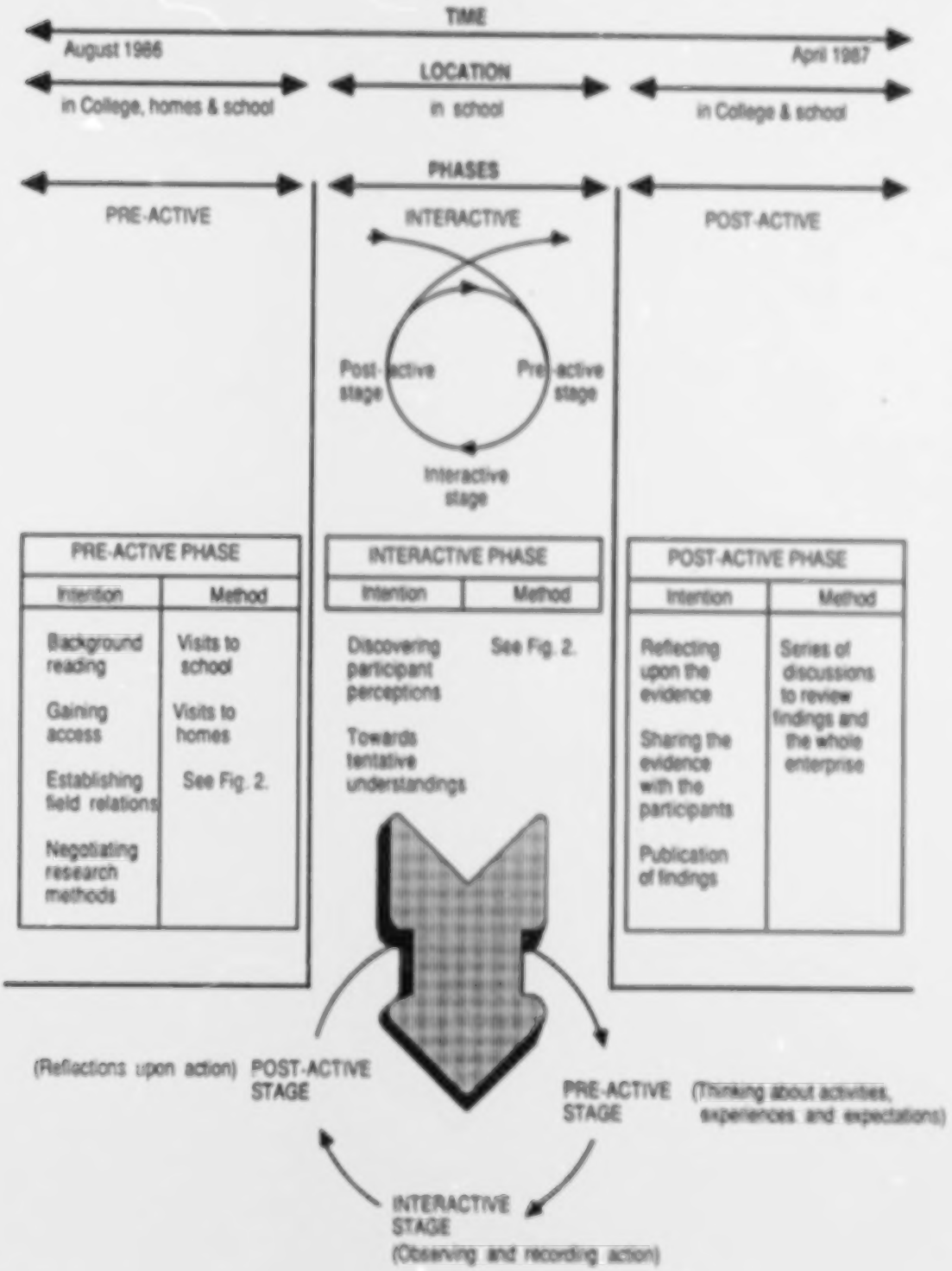

FIG. 1.
AN OVERVIEW OF THE DESIGN OF THE PROJECT

children. At times staffroom talk was dominated by discussions concerning the relative merits of four year olds in reception classes. In this sense the origin and ownership of, what came to be, the research problem, was firmly located within the school. In designing the research project we sought ways to preserve this and acknowledged the potency of Day's (1985) comment, "I will argue that if research is to make a significant contribution to teacher learning and change, researchers must move away from the notion of themselves as prime designers and interpreters of the motivations, thoughts and actions of others , towards a more interdependent role in which collaboration, consultation and negotiation are first principles."

Roles of participants

Participant roles had to be carefully thought through and tactfully negotiated. In the pre-active phase, (see FIG.1) both of us were outside the phenomenon of interest, but we had a clear goal of working together on an issue or real human significance. We wanted to do more than merely work with other people. We wanted to set up a supportive framework where personal, context-based participant experiences could be shared and critiqued.

a) Collaboration involving teachers with non-teachers

We sought to extend the definition of collaborative research which focussed only on, "the personalised empowerment of the teacher practitioner through an increased understanding and critique of one's educational practice and the educational theories supporting and guiding those practices." (Henry 1986) The enterprise also had to be empowering for the non-teachers, the parents and their children, who would be both emotionally and intellectually involved with the phenomenon under study. The thinking therefore was that any changes to practice would be based upon the shared understandings of both teachers and non-teachers.

b) Roles of the college tutors

Christine had taught in Hollywood School for eight years prior to taking up an appointment in a college of Higher Education, and had, therefore, intimate knowledge of the school, its policies and practice. She had been granted a term's secondment to school and we built the pilot stage of the project around this. For the duration of the term she worked alongside a reception class teacher, entering fully into both the classroom and school situation. Christine therefore adopted an 'agent-central' role and discharged it in much the same way as other such as Clandinin (1986) and Elbaz (1984).

Anthony's role was much more of an 'agent-free' one at this time, offering to the other participants more of a detached outsider, rather than in insider perspective on things. It was a role characterised by visits to the research site mainly at critical moments, such as when parents and teachers discussed a video-recording that was made of the children's behaviours in school and we shared our developing with an adviser for Primary Education. He moved towards an agent-central role in the pre-active and post-active phases (see FIG.1).

c) The parent's role

The parents were co-researchers. In the pre-

active phase and in consultation with the head teacher, the parents of the four year old children starting school in September 1986 were invited to join the project. We made visits to their homes to put our motives and intentions to them. The parent's role was a consequence of the methodology that emerged for the study.

d) The pupil's role

The methodology had, as its starting point, the experiences of the participants involved. It recognised the need to avoid seeing the pupils as the 'objects' of study. The pupils, just like the adults involved, had feelings, values, abilities, needs and expectations which conditioned their participation in the project. The adults had the responsibility of creating a number of contexts and opportunities for the children to disclose their thoughts and feelings about their encounters in their reception class.

Gathering and handling information

Generally a qualitative research style was used. Information was gathered using a multi-method approach based upon the notions of investigator, method and time triangulation. (Cohen and Manion 1980) Fundamentally, we were seeking an holistic understanding of the experiences related to the child-school incorporation process. We gathered different kinds of evidence across the child's first term in school. (see FIG.2) Each experience was recorded through a variety of mediums including interviews, fieldnotes, questionnaire responses, parental diaries, taped conversations and then reflected upon. We analysed our evidence to discover recurring themes and issues and then tried to link them together. What emerged was a 'pattern of interrelationships' (Kaplan 1964) which we came to believe to be useful both as a way of describing and explaining the phenomenon under study. We began to think about the pattern of interrelationships in terms of the notion of 'rites of passage'. (Van Gennep 1965) As more evidence became available so this patten became more filled in and extended. In this sense it was truly organic. Thus we moved from particular instances to more general understandings.

FIG.2 shows that the methods of gathering evidence had two loci, some were home-based activities while others were done in school. We hoped that our methods met Cooper's (1977) criterion, namely that they were sensitive towards and respectful of the child's world.

a) School-based activities

The kind of research described in this paper is often called a case study. Observation is at the heart of every case study. FIG.2 shows that our observational evidence was varied and unique. School-based observations in our project were records made by the head teacher and by us of activities, situations and experiences across the first school term. In school the observations were recorded through fieldnotes, the use of video recordings and through photographs. The aim was to record participant activities and gather experiences of six different situations, or social episodes namely, 'dressing and undressing', 'playtime', 'drinks', 'table-based work', 'lunchtime' and 'coming into school and going home'. Rather than verbally articulating our interpretation of the children's behaviours to parents in each of the social episodes, we made

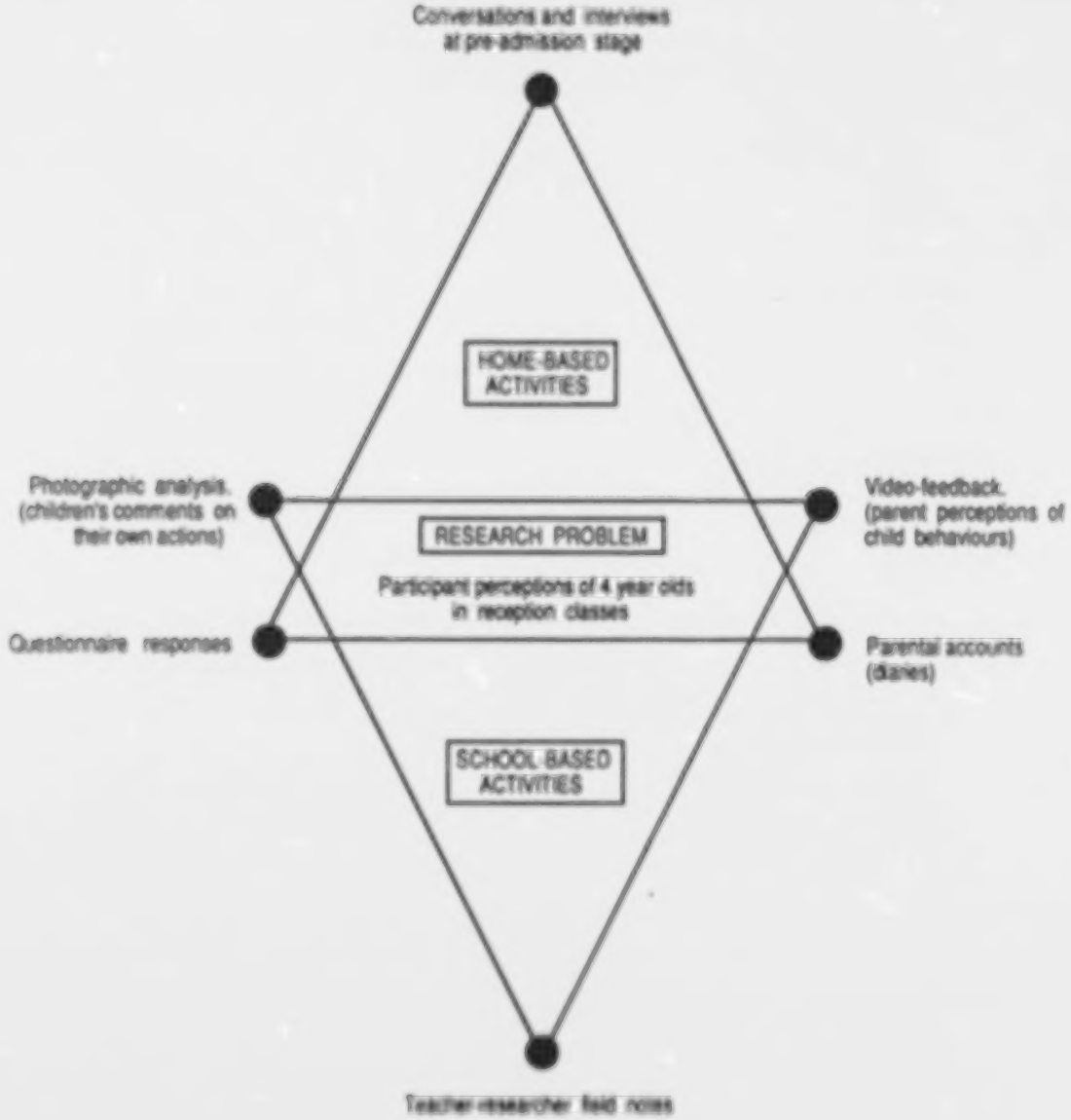
Conversations and interviews at pre-admission stage
HOME-BASED ACTIVITIES
Photographic analysis. (children's comments on their own actions)
Video-feedback. (parent perceptions of child behaviours)
RESEARCH PROBLEM
Participant perceptions of 4 year olds in reception classes
Questionnaire responses
Parental accounts (diaries)
SCHOOL-BASED ACTIVITIES
Teacher-researcher field notes

FIG. 2.
THE GATHERING OF EVIDENCE BASED UPON THE NOTION OF COMPLEMENTARY TRIANGULATION

filmed images of them. (Hull 1985) Video-recording was much less reactive than we thought it might be. The children were not upset by the presence of the head with the video camera in the classroom and being filmed in the other parts of the school. The tapes were edited and viewed by the teachers, parents and children. These images formed a basis for a rich discussion. These discussions were audio-taped and later transcribed and analysed.

We built up a photographic file of the children engaged in each of the six social episodes. We used this file as a stimulus for small group discussion and therefore in a catalytic role to elicit the children's private thoughts and feelings, in much the same way as Walker and Wiedel (1985) had done.

b) Home-based activities

Triangulation is a procedure which studies a phenomenon from more than one standpoint. It was during home-based activities that the realities as experienced by the parents and their children were being articulated. We recorded these in three different ways, through a questionnaire, a diary of parent-child conversations and through tutor-parent-child discussions. We put together a questionnaire with the head who was keen to gather responses from, and to involve, all the parents who had children in reception classes in the school. It was sent to thirty-four parents who had children in the rising fives category and twenty-eight parents of pre-rising fives. Seventy-five percent of the questionnaires were returned. They contained much valuable information which was used to elaborate, cross-check and confirm ideas and issues that were emerging from the evidence gathered by other means.

The parents of seven pre-rising fives agreed to keep a diary for the first half of the term. These diaries recorded children's conversations with a parent about school. We came to regard these as genuine insider accounts. They were a rich source of evidence about the personal experiences of individual children.

We also organised a number of meetings at home with the children and their parents. This aimed to keep the parents involved and in touch, provided us with an opportunity to share our developing understandings with them and to hear their points of view. These meetings were audio-taped.

Reflections and understandings

Given that the attribution of meaning is generally problematic what follows is one interpretation of our evidence. To communicate and to illuminate the structure of the child-school incorporation process we have drawn upon the notion of 'rites of passage'. Van Gennep (1965) argued that the life of any individual in any society is characterised by a number of 'passages', from one age to another, one occupation to another and so on and that these passages are often accompanied by special activities, behaviours, ceremonies or rites of separation, transition or incorporation. We believed that understanding the human significance of these rites of passage and communicating them effectively to parents, would provide a basis for discussion and decision-making about what represented appropriate practice and provision for four year olds in reception classrooms at Hollywood

School.

In general we found that children may be most under stress during the first important weeks of school when three different kinds of activity are going on:

1. When SEPARATIONS are going on:

This is when the child has to leave their parents, brothers and sisters, their home, in the daily ebb and flow of movement between home and school.

2. When TRANSITIONS are going on:

These include children moving from one activity to another, when children move from the more familiar classroom place to other parts of the school, when they return home at the end of the day and have to adjust and when, for example, they undress and dress from classwork to P.E.. Visiting the school prior to entry is a 'transitional' activity.

3. When INCORPORATIONS are going on:

These are activities where the child is helped to become part of a larger and less familiar group than that of the family, the class as a group the school with its own special group identity. For example, when the child eats and drinks with a group of children and when a child engages in corporate activities such as assemblies, singing and prayers.

SEPARATIONS then focus upon 'breaks' between people and places, TRANSITIONS stress the 'links' between people in places, while INCORPORATIONS focus upon the way people identify with a place. What follows is an illustration of these potentially stressful social episodes.

SEPARATIONS

a) Some parent views

The significance of the first morning in school as an act of separation emerged clearly and strongly in the parent's accounts. Something of the range of thoughts and feelings is portrayed in the following comments:

"We both felt a sense of loss on the first day as it marked a big and significant change in family life and a recognition of greater independence for her."

"I was upset at losing my little girl - she will become so independent now."

"I felt I'd lost him to someone else."

"I suddenly felt redundant after being at home bringing her up for four years."

"I was happy for him but felt that I wasn't wanted anymore."

During the first week the parents brought the children into the classroom. After this they were

asked to help establish a 'lining up' routine. The parents brought the children into the school playground and when the morning bell rang they put their child into a line with others from their class. The teacher then led them into school leaving the parents behind in the playground. The significance of this separation ritual for both parent and child comes through clearly in the diaries and questionnaire responses:

"He was very hesitant about lining up with the other children in the playground but after much encouragement he went. He was very proud of himself and he though he had achieved something too."

"On arrival she had to line up outside and go in without me. She seemed quite happy about this and went in without a backward glance."

"He complained about me going into school. He wanted me to wait outside with the other mums."

b) Some teacher views

The following extracts have been taken from our fieldnotes. They describe the way staff tried to ease each four year old child into school and thus trying to make the acts of separation happy, anticipatory moments.

FIRST MORNING

"First seven in this morning. Margaret (class teacher) and Mel (head) received them in Mel's office, then brought them down to Gwyn (assistant) and I. We had play activities set out and just showed the children toilets, pegs, drawers and then played and talked to them. The mums stayed until each saw that their child was o.k."

SECOND MORNING

"Had eight more this morning. Yesterday's intake came in with no difficulty. They remembered where to put their flasks and where their pegs were. Did a guided tour with yesterday's group. They were very sensible and appeared to enjoy chatting to the other children. They asked a lot of questions too! The mums stayed with the new children until they were settled. (This only took about five minutes and many said how surprised they were that the children settled so quickly.) A number of the children wanted reassurance during the morning about when their mums were coming back and where they would meet them."

THIRD MORNING

"Had another ten in this morning-it certainly made a difference. The children all came in without crying although some looked nervous initially. Yet another guided tour so that the children could build up a mental map of some of the people and things that make up the school.

Showed them all the classes so that they could get the feel of the size of the school and some of the 'routes' through school. Also introduced them to all the teachers, the secretary, cooks and the caretaker as friendly and helpful faces to look out for."

FOURTH MORNING

"We thought we might get a few tears this morning as the novelty wears off a bit, but no! (Hazel wasn't so lucky with her new ones though.)"

FIFTH MORNING

"No problems coming in-though the class next door had two children screaming. Ours came in well and most of them settled with a book."

SIXTH MORNING

"After the weekend we had our first tears. Kirsty was brought in by her sister (not her dad) and was very reluctant to come in at all. She cried for about fifteen minutes but once we started activities she joined in and was fine. Andrew came in crying but soon recovered. Matthew cried for the first time because he thought his mum had gone without giving him a kiss. We managed to catch her, she came back, kissed him and said goodbye and this did the trick."

c) Some pupil views

Some parents agreed to keep a diary of their conversations with their child each day after school. Some examples from one diary of conversations during the first few days of school are given here. We regarded these as genuine insider accounts and a rich source of evidence about the personal experiences of individual children.

"Quite contented with his morning at school. A bit shy at first - but afterwards was full of news-songs he knew, plasticine, cars etc.. When asked if there was anything he didn't like he said, "no". He said he hadn't gone into the big hall and sounded relieved. Very apprehensive about that. Didn't want to take uniform off after school. Wanted to go back in the afternoon." ....."Happy and eager for school. Not at all 'clingy' today. Could recognise a few of his classmates in the playground. Went in without saying goodbye!" ....."A little more tired than usual although used to half-time nursery. Enjoying school very much. Full of news. Remembers bits of new songs. Did a very effective dramatic rendition of 'Three Bears' with voices etc.. Obviously made a big impression. Particularly enjoyed 'Farmers in his Den' and acting being Humpty Dumpty. Enjoys telling me of new rules like walking into line not running. More confident than ever at home (except his ability to dress himself is worse rather than better). However, does enjoy an extra cuddle or two. I have an urge to show him more affection than usual-perhaps as a reaction to his 'growing up'."

TRANSITIONS

The human significance of some of the 'rites of transition' that proved stressful, or potentially so, is illustrated with reference to four kinds of activity. The aim is to give the reader something of the flavour of participant experiences and what was done to help children cope with these transitions.

1. Visits to school prior to entry

All parents were asked to comment upon the impact and utility of visiting school before their child started in September. What emerged from

the study was that these visits are a critical transitional activity for all involved and need to be planned carefully. Meeting people, having the chance to ask questions, to receive information, for parent and child to find their way around school are, of course, important. But what also emerged was the way parents and children used their visits to make judgements about the school, about curriculum and pedagogy in particular, to form opinions about their child's 'readiness' for school and to set an agenda for home-based activities prior to entry. The following extracts from our data base reflect some of these concerns.

AN EXTRACT FROM OUR INTERVIEW WITH THE HEAD TEACHER

Head: "As a result of the research project we are looking at this very closely now but up till last July the procedure was for the child to be entered on the register as wanting to come in September and being given information about the school, which I think was quite limited. It didn't tell them very much eg. uniforms, dinners, nits etc. - more could be done to prepare them in this respect. Just before the end of the summer term they come into school to be with the teacher (parent and child) and spend a little time in the classroom talking to the teacher and playing. Some of the playgroup children come on a little walk round the school but there's no official programme, its very informal."

EXTRACTS FROM THREE CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS AFTER SCHOOL

"We took them once to meet the teacher and see the classroom. We met the teacher very briefly-she told us what they needed eg. pumpbag, painting overall and said hello to the children. It was nice to see where they were going-it was nice for them to see their children and their classroom. They were full of it when we came home. It suddenly gave them a picture of it in their mind."

"It seems that for the first few weeks there will be a lot of play and they will learn certain things within this. I'd like to think she'll be channelled a little bit towards reading and writing. I have tried a bit of writing with her but she gives up very quickly. With a disciplined environment where she knows she's got to do it I think she'll learn. I would like her to be able to do this quite soon."

2. Family conversations

Making time for family conversations about school before the child starts emerged as another important transitional activity. Many parents commented upon this. What follows is typical of the comments we received.

"We talked a lot about what she'd do, what she'd wear and who she'd see."

"His sister told him a lot about school and I told him about the good things he could do and that he'd be with his sister and friends."

"Talking to his sister was a large step in his preparation in that it made him familiar with routines and gave us all something to talk about."

"We talked about it a bit as lightly and naturally as possible but did not keep talking about it for fear of making him anxious before

starting."

3. Playtime

Transitions not only include children moving from one activity to another but also include shifts in the nature of the 'activity space'. Working in the classroom and then coping with life in the playground proved to be a stressful experience for some four year olds. We recorded the following in our fieldnotes:

"Again playtime was a bit of a trauma for some. One of the new boys screamed for the whole playtime. He was o.k. while the teacher was talking to him but as soon as they spoke to anyone else he seemed to realise where he was and started screaming again."

There were other unhappy tales also, such as the one recounted to us by one parent at a follow-up interview in her home at the end of the first term:

"She seems to like playtime but she did get upset a few times at the beginning when some of the older ones pushed her over. This came out a couple of weeks later when she was having a nightmare. She was shaking and it was something about school. In the end it turned out that one of the older boys had a pretend snake and kept throwing it at her. She was terrified."

But other more typical accounts of pupil's playtime experiences included:

"He gets filthy. He likes playtime a lot, enjoys running about and playing games. He tells us about children that have had an accident lately. He's talked about the juniors picking on him and having his crisps, but he enjoys it."

"I gather from Nicholas he plays Superman and creates when he can't have his anorak on as he uses this as a cloak."

4. Going home

The evidence we gathered helped us all to achieve a better understanding of each child's transitional adjustment needs. In their diaries parents recorded many of the psycho-physical adjustments that had to be made when their child returned home. For example, some of the most dominant themes were entries that described parent's own emotional state and that of their child, other entries described the child's state of tiredness and how this affected family life, while the move from mornings only to a whole day at school disorientated some four year olds. An example of one of these themes is given here:

"He was really tired at the end of the day and still is on Thursdays and Fridays. He's coped though. He wouldn't have fallen asleep but when he came home he couldn't adjust. He was mardy and miserable, didn't want to do things, didn't speak to us in the usual way. He just seemed mixed up for a while and being tired didn't help. Sometimes the slightest thing would upset him."

INCORPORATIONS

Encouraging each child to feel a member of a larger and less familiar group than that of the family was an important part of both home and school activities in the child's first term. We came to regard some of these 'rites of incorporation' as a way of compensating for any

feelings of loss, loneliness or insecurity that children may have experienced due to the 'separations' and 'transitions' that were going on. Children were helped to identify with school in a number of ways.

For example it was important that at home parents discussed with their child the practicalities and the significance of buying clothes and equipment for school. This was one way in which children were helped to empathise with school as a place. Parents wrote about this rite of incorporation in their diaries:

"Preparing the uniform together was exciting. Buying the tie was a very proud step."

"We went out together to buy her school things. I let her choose her own flask because she was going to be a big school girl."

"He changed in one day from being a child who was not going to school to a boy with a uniform, bag and flask, looking forward like mad to starting."

This identity with school also showed through in other kinds of account such as where aspects of school life became part of life at home:

"He wants to watch the TV programme he sees at school. We've watched 'Let's Go Maths'. He was obviously delighted to see the familiar things he'd had at school."

"At home she plays school, she being the teacher."

"He goes round the house saying S for snake, C for cat. He's also started drawing numbers in the air and asking me what I think they are."

Although arguably also a rite of transition we believe the welcoming interview by the head teacher for each child on their first day provides a good example of a rite of incorporation. This clearly indicated to the children that they were a valued member of the school community from that moment on. Parents who wrote about this commented:

"David changed from a child who on Wednesday was not going to school to a boy who walked smartly into school with his flask and bag worried he was going to be late. As a mother, I'm sure it was the talk that he had on his first morning with Mr. Jones, who took the trouble to ask David about his home and other questions, rather than ask me. I think this made David feel part of the school and important because he had answered questions rather than Mr. Jones asking me."

SOME PERCEIVED GAINS

Starting school is a critical period in the life history of every child. It is a very complex and poorly understood phenomena. We need to challenge the notion that the child simply 'adjusts' to school. The child-school incorporation process is a dynamic, multifaceted, interactive process between all the participants involved. For too long efforts to improve practice and provision for four year olds in reception classes has focused upon an objective analysis of the nature and role of pre-school playgroups and nursery schools, resource deficiencies, mechanisms and procedures for

admission. We believe that there is an alternative and complementary way to think about practice and provision, one that documents, assesses and then acts upon the 'experience' of starting school as recorded and discussed about by the children, parents and teachers involved. In this way improvements are likely to be sharply focused and will be school specific.

The design of the project rested very much upon the principles of collaboration, consultation and negotiation. Participant roles, the generation and analysis of evidence and the sharing of developing understandings and sensitivities had to be carefully thought through. We hope that our design will act as something of a model for others to use. An analysis of a number of social episodes has led us to believe that the lived experiences of the participants can be usefully understood in relation to the replicated rites of separation, transition and incorporation. We found that children were most likely to be under stress during the first weeks of school, when these different kinds of rites were going on. We have come to the conclusion that appropriate changes and real improvements in policy, practice and provision must be based upon a cognizance of the impact of these rites upon the participants.

In Hollywood school these understandings have led to a number of tangible outcomes which have been incorporated into school policy and practice. For the sake of analysis the outcomes have been grouped into four areas:

1. Home-school links
2. Admission policy
3. Classroom practice
4. Appraisal and staff development.

1. Home-school links

It is widely acknowledged by those involved in the project that one of the biggest gains over the year has been the closer links which have developed between parents and teachers. Working together in a spirit of trust on a shared task in which the contribution of all those involved was valued equally has led to changes in attitude which we believe will have a longterm effect on school policy and practice. Initial suspicions and lack of knowledge on both sides have been gradually eroded over the year and a genuine partnership has developed between the parents and teachers as they worked towards their mutual goal of helping the children to settle into school happily and in an appropriate fashion. A number of mechanisms have been instituted which formalise and acknowledge these developing relationships. For example:

Informal Discussions - a series of informal parent/teacher discussion groups throughout the school year in which problems and experiences may be shared.

Daily Meeting Point - a specific time has been allocated every day in which the teacher is available to the parents in order to pass on and receive information about the children.

2. Admission policy

The school's admission procedures for this September have been considerably changed as a direct result of feedback from the children, parents and teachers. For example:

Pre-admission visits - all the new children have

been invited to a series of morning or afternoon visits over the summer term before they start, during which they can join in activities going on in the classroom they are to join. Their parents come with them initially but can leave them once the children are settled and happy.

Pre-admission parents meeting - this took place in the summer term and has substantially changed in character. It was given a much higher profile in the timetable of school events, and its style altered from being a short information-giving session to a much longer and fuller session, in which a number of issues to do with starting school were discussed and the value of parents' contribution to the process was emphasised.

Age-phased classes - there has been an acceptance at school management level that the younger children should not be mixed with older starters in one class. This is an acknowledgement that the younger children do have different and specific needs which need to be catered for.

Pre-school playgroup/nursery links - the school has made a great effort to forge stronger links with its feeder pre-school playgroups and nursery schools. The playgroup leaders, nursery staff and children have been invited to a number of school based activities in order to achieve this.

Part-full time attendance - the decision when to change from part to full time schooling has been made much more flexible. Children are now to be considered individually and a joint decision between parents and teachers will be reached.

3. Classroom practice

This is harder to asses because there has been a subtle and gradual evolution of ideas and practices as the year progressed. However, we can point to a number of overt changes that have taken place. For example:

Classroom layout and equipment - the reception classes have been allocated a considerable amount of new equipment appropriate for these younger children eg. large construction toys, a home corner, sand and water equipment. This has provided the children with activities which will inevitably impact on the curricular experiences provided in the classroom.

Work/play balance - over the year, the balance between work and play was discussed and debated upon by those involved in the project. There were conflicting views as to what was appropriate with teachers often feeling pressurised to emphasise the more formal work activities eg. getting onto the school reading and maths schemes, at the expense of play experiences. The debate that ensued has enabled teachers and parents to think more carefully about how an acceptable and appropriate balance might be achieved.

4. Appraisal and development

The school has become a research community and one able to act upon the information generated in order to appraise and develop its policy and practice. For example:

Appraisal - the project has generated a set of manageable procedures which engender a sense of collegiality and openness, and an atmosphere of confidence and shared trust in which problems and shortcomings may be openly discussed. It

has led to constructive self-appraisal by individual teachers and parents, provided insights into school policy and given a basis for future planning. The findings have generated practical, school-based strategies by which the experience offered to these young children may be improved.

In conclusion, the project has provided a context for the sharing and pooling of parent, child and teacher experience, and a basis for the genuine, mutually beneficial, colleagual relationship between all the participants involved. This is an example of how working and thinking together can produce practical, context-based, potent personalised insights and understandings, grounded in the realities of parents, teachers and children.

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